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**Burns' national parks film debuts in Asheville**

***By: Dale Neal***

Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the rest of the nation's national parks are a uniquely American invention that brings democracy to the landscape, according to the writer and producer of a new Ken Burns film series.

"This is the Declaration of Independence applied to a beautiful continent," said Dayton Duncan "Only a democracy would come up with the idea that the most special places should be preserved for everybody, not just the rich and royalty."

An Asheville audience got a preview Wednesday of "The National Parks: America's Best Idea" in a screening at the Diana Wortham Theatre. The six-part, 12-hour series will air this fall on PBS.

The Smokies, celebrating its 75th anniversary as a park, plays a prominent role in the historical narrative.

The film focuses on the individual stories of writer Horace Kephart and photographer George Masa, who became fast friends while promoting the protection of the Great Smokies as a national park in the 1930s.

"There were lots of different people who were trying to save a huge amount of land in an attempt to stop the last stands of virgin forest from falling under the lumberman's saw," Duncan said. "It's a great story."

The film also touches on the history of the region from the removal of the Cherokee to the displacement of longtime settlers who left behind their homesteads and cemeteries to create the new park.

Kate Welch, a member of the Bryson City Board of Aldermen and the board of the nonprofit Great Smoky Mountains Association, said the film should raise awareness of the Smokies and might even bring more visitors to the town on the park's south side.

Some Swain County residents once lived in areas that were once part of the park and many others in the area are familiar with the history of the park, she said.

But she said that just Wednesday morning, a Jackson County woman in a group Welch was in said she had never heard of Cades Cove, the broad valley ringed by mountains in Tennessee that is one of the park's most popular areas.



"The film could very well ... make (viewers) ask questions about the Smokies," she said.

As an American idea, national parks are like baseball and jazz, two other subjects that Burns and Duncan have explored in popular series for PBS.

Duncan got the idea for a national park series in 1998 when he took an extended vacation with his family out west, visiting the same parks he had seen as a boy in 1959.

"Someday my kids would be standing at these same sites with their kids," Duncan said. "The parks are a connection from one generation to the next. The same thing you saw as a boy will be the same thing Americans can have the opportunity to see 150 years from now."

"When I suggested the idea to Ken, it took about 30 seconds for him to agree," Duncan said.

The story of the series echoes an idea first advanced by Frederick Law Olmstead, the Central Park designer who also laid out the grounds of George Vanderbilt's Biltmore Estate.

Olmstead was one of the original commissioners in charge of protecting Yosemite when the federal government purchased the land and turned it over to the state of California for safekeeping.

"Olmstead argued that in a democracy where the pursuit of happiness is a right, the government is obligated to set aside these special places, so everybody can benefit from them," Duncan said.

Without national parks, Duncan said it wouldn't be unimaginable to have million-dollar estates along the south rim of the Grand Canyon or Congress selling off Smokies ridge tops for a few golf courses as a way to tackle the national debt.

"If you don't have people visiting these parks, you won't have defenders who say that is sacrilegious," he said.

There will always be a tension between keeping the parks open to all visitors and preserving the parks and wildlife for generations of Americans to come. "Those same tensions were happening in the 1860s when Yosemite was protected to now." Next up for the Burns film company is an additional episode updating the popular "Baseball" series, Duncan said. "I knew when the Red Sox won the World Series, Ken was going to do another episode. He had to tell that story."